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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CHENGDU 000243

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR ECON CH

SUBJECT: EVEREST AND BEYOND -- A RARE GLIMPSE INTO WESTERN TIBET

REF: A) CHENGDU 239        B) CHENGDU 236        C) CHENGDU 235

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, U.S. Consulate General, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The remote western areas of China's Tibetan Autonomous Region are a mixture of active military facilities, sensitive religious sites, and vulnerable archeological ruins. The Everest Base Camp, at which a People's Armed Police station was recently added, has become a rather squalid tent city serving tourists as well as mountaineers. A project much reported on by the international press to pave the road to the Base Camp, however, has been put on hold until after the Olympics. Numerous mountain passes apparently give access to Nepal and India for would-be refugees and those seeking religious education. Central government political control seems firm in the region as it ramps up for extensive tourism development. A mysterious disease has caused significant damage to local sheep herds. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Consul General, Congenoff, and Consulate's ethnic Tibetan Political Assistant visited the western areas of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) from September 10-19. Other aspects of the visit have been reported reftels. From what we were able to turn up in our research and based on the institutional memory of our long-term Congen personnel, this long (and very dusty) road trip was apparently the first visit to the area by U.S. diplomatic representatives since 1950 when then-Vice Consul Douglas Mackiernan made his ill-fated evacuation from Xinjiang's Urumqi (known then as Tihwa) in the wake of the Chinese Civil War. He made it as far as the southern edge of the Chang Tang wilderness before being shot and killed by Tibetan border guards at a location roughly at 33 degrees north latitude, 88 degrees east longitude.

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BEYOND SHIGATSE - A RUINED MONASTERY AND THE EVEREST BASE CAMP  
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¶3. (C) Monasteries in the western TAR are almost exclusively affiliated with the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, traditionally linked to the Dalai and Panchen Lamas. A few hours south of Shigatse we looked into conditions at the 730

year-old Shelkar Choede Monastery, which was once home to 400 monks (current population 35). A relatively long climb at altitude to the site enabled us at times to (literally) leave our principal Lhasa Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) handler behind in the dust. Heavily damaged during the Cultural Revolution, much of the monastery was in disrepair, and monks there told us they lacked the funds necessary to build a funeral stupa for their recently deceased abbot, Kyenrap Jampa, who died in January of 2007. They also said they believe the numerous dogs inhabiting the temple are the reincarnated souls of those PLA soldiers and Red Guards who had attacked the monastery during the Cultural Revolution, but who had acted under duress.

¶14. (C) Paved roads ended not long after the Tingri County seat (population 50,000, elevation 5000 meters or 16,500 feet), where the road to Mount Everest Base Camp One began. Local villagers there told us the question of paving the road from Tingri to the Base Camp was a subject of much controversy: some favored paving the road under the assumption it will raise local incomes due to increased visitors to the area, but added government officials had told them the project was postponed until at least after the Olympics due to "international opposition." However, some local interlocutors suspected the real reason was opposition from local travel agencies (managed by Han Chinese and affiliated with the military) that make considerable profits from renting four wheel-drive vehicles to tourists and mountaineers.

¶15. (C) Although unpaved, dusty, and under repair in some areas, the 110-kilometer (72 miles) road from Tingri to the Everest Base Camp was in generally good condition, with a fair number of tourists and a few trucks. As we approached the camp area, we saw a large and apparently newly constructed hotel, which was not yet open for business. The camp itself (altitude 5200 meters or about 17,200 feet) was a particularly unprepossessing collection of about 20 identical black canvas tents reminiscent of pictures of the Alaska gold rush, and bearing names such as "Hotel California" and "Disneyland." A few advertised mixed drinks. Local interlocutors told us many female sex workers come to the area in the summer to meet the demand of mostly Han

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Chinese tourists. The interlocutors also told us the sex trade and other unsavory aspects of the camp had expanded greatly after the TAR Mountaineering Association assumed management of the area about two years ago. Garbage and other waste littered the area. Our initial plan to remain overnight was cancelled by our FAO handler who told us he could not "guarantee our safety" there.

¶16. (C) A few hundred meters south of the camp was a new post manned by People's Armed Police (PAP) officers, who required all travelers to identify themselves. A little beyond that spot was a large stone mound, which marked the farthest spot allowed to non-mountaineering visitors, and was a popular spot for Han tourists to pose. (Note: The mound was the site of the April 2007 incident involving the unfurling of a banner by several American citizens calling for Tibetan independence. End note.) Interestingly, on the ground not too far from the mound lay a large rock with a Tibetan inscription calling for "complete independence for Tibet."

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DUST, DIRT, FLIES - AND HOLY LAKES AND MOUNTAINS  
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¶17. (C) Road conditions and accommodations deteriorated dramatically west of Tingri and the Everest Base Camp, as we crossed Saga County (population 10,000, elevation 4600 meters or about 15,200 feet) and Drong Pa County (Ch: Zhongba, population 15,000, elevation 5000 meters or about 16,500 feet). In the Drong Pa County seat, the three of us spent the night sharing a single room huddled around a yak dung stove; toilet facilities were an unlit dirt courtyard patrolled by Tibetan mastiffs that fortunately did not mind sharing their territory with Congen

personnel. We also encountered several hardy independent travelers, including Canadian bicyclists from Thailand and a neuro-surgeon from Denmark who said she had traveled by bus from Islamabad through western Xinjiang. (Note: The presence of these independent foreign travelers would appear to contradict official announcements that such non-group travel would no longer be permitted following the Everest banner incident. End note.)

¶8. (C) In Saga and Drong Pa Counties, we passed several road crews consisting of PLA soldiers in uniform. Some local interlocutors indicated that side roads in the area branched off toward mountain passes garrisoned by the PAP and PLA, where Tibetans make occasional attempts to cross into Nepal. The interlocutors also noted that, while China recognized five official "ports" or border crossings between the TAR and India and Nepal, they believe more than 300 passes actually exist. Some of these passes are admittedly quite difficult and dangerous, but nevertheless serve as informal exit routes for refugees and those seeking religious education.

¶9. (C) Leaving Shigatse Prefecture at its western border with Ngari (Ch: Ali) Prefecture on September 13, we left the Chengdu Military District and entered the Lanzhou Military District, the same district that includes Xinjiang. This change was reflected in the license plates of military trucks that passed us on the dirt highway, many carrying soldiers and unmarked crates.

¶10. (SBU) Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash, lying not far from the Indian border in the southern part of Ngari Prefecture, are said to be sacred to four religions - Hinduism, Jainism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Bon (the pre-Buddhist native religion of Tibet). As such, they are extremely popular destinations for religious pilgrims, despite their remoteness. Local residents and officials told us that each year, more and more Indian and Nepalese Hindus make the pilgrimage, some of the richest traveling by chartered helicopter to a border point, and then renting four-wheel drive vehicles for the Chinese portion of the trip. Over 10,000 Indian tourists visited the area in 2007. As bathing in Lake Manasarovar is considered sacrilegious by Tibetans, the ritual ablutions performed in it by an ever-growing number of Hindus has proved to be a source of some local tension (see paragraph 13).

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FAR WESTERN TIBET - A POTENTIALLY WORLD-CLASS TOURIST SITE  
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¶11. (C) Western Ngari's Tsamda (Ch: Zhada) County (population

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10,000, elevation 4000 meters or about 13,200 feet) is home to the spectacular ruins of the ancient Guge Kingdom, set in what can be described as a Tibetan version of Utah's Monument Valley. Built into the side of a mountain, the main castle complex rises several hundred feet above the valley floor. But even this remote site saw extensive damage during the Cultural Revolution. Our guide (who was a local artist involved in restoring the palace's religious murals) showed us the shattered remains of several statues of the Buddha, as well as a pile of sacred texts still lying loose and unprotected on a dirt floor. When asked about government efforts to protect the site, he made a cynical expression and said the government had "announced" that 80 million RMB (USD 10.5 million) was already spent on restoration. One of our ethnic Tibetan FAO handlers noted to our FSN that the money may have "disappeared."

¶12. (C) Approaching Ngari Prefecture's capital city of Gar (Chinese also Ali) (population 70,000, elevation 4500 meters or about 15,000 feet) on September 15, we passed the site of the city's future airport, where the tarmac had already been laid. Local officials told us that following completion of the airport in 2010 and asphalting of the area's major highways (to be completed in 2008), the area expects to receive 570,000 tourists

by 2020, up from 60,000 in 2006. According to the officials, Boeing representatives have recently visited Gar to examine how best to retool aircraft engines to handle the high altitude take offs and landings that will be necessary.

¶13. (C) In Gar, we were received by a Prefecture Vice Governor Wang Jun, a "Help Tibet Cadre" (yuanzang ganbu) who said she had served in Ngari since 1982. Over a long and surprisingly sumptuous banquet, she was not shy about emphasizing her pioneering spirit and dedication to the people of the area. However, we were told later by local contacts she and her family have profited greatly from her work in the region. She reportedly drives a high-end (and very impractical for Gar) convertible BMW, and has substantial interests in several local businesses. (Note: During the same banquet, our FAO handlers (both ethnic Tibetan and Han) and Vice Governor Wang took turns complaining about the personal habits of Indians, as well as their concern at what they termed the "disgusting" custom of Hindu pilgrims washing their bodies in Lake Manasarovar. They bruited the idea of building something like a "giant fishbowl" along the side of the lake in order to accommodate the Hindus. End note.)

¶14. (C) The next two days of travel took us over Routes S301 and S206, two heavily potholed, unpaved high-altitude highways through Getse (Ch: Gaize), Ngamring (Ch: Anran), and Tsochen (Ch: Cuoqing) Counties. There was little evident military activity along these routes, and road maintenance crews consisted of local Tibetan men and women. Towns were squalid and dirty, and foreign travelers almost nonexistent. Despite the miserable conditions and grinding poverty, Tsochen County Governor Xiong Wenzhi claimed that local per capita government assistance exceeded 6000 RMB (USD 789) in 2006, an astronomical sum by rural Tibetan standards. Asked about family sizes in the county, Xiong went on for some length about the proclivity of Tibetans to have multiple children, claiming that some families have as many as 15.

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A MYSTERIOUS SHEEP DISEASE, AND EMPTY BUILDINGS  
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¶15. (C) When we first entered the TAR, local contacts told us a disease they referred to as "Mystery Sheep Disease" (Yang X Bing) had recently attacked herds on the plateau, resulting in the death of over 200,000 animals. Beginning in Ngari Prefecture, our cars were regularly stopped by roadside checkpoints, where our vehicles' tires and undercarriages were sprayed with a disinfectant. Although our FAO handler at first refused to tie the disinfection stations to the sheep disease, in Tsamda County we later noticed a poster in Mandarin warning residents about a serious bovine disease called "sheep cud-chewing animal epidemic" (Chinese yang xiao fanchushou jiqing) and officials there confirmed that 200,000 sheep had either been culled or had died from the disease. Although they were unable to describe the symptoms of the disease, they claimed it had come into the TAR from Nepal within the last few months.

¶16. (C) An obvious feature of the Tibetan landscape was the number of newly constructed buildings - schools, government and

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police facilities, and hotels - along the highways. However, most of those buildings appeared to be only partly occupied, or even completely empty. A few hotels looked as if they had been used for a brief period and then abandoned. One rooming house we stayed in bore a plaque stating it had been constructed in 2000, but it was shockingly dilapidated (quite literally): light switches consisted of bare wires; guests were expected to turn the lights on and off by twisting the bare wires together with their fingers.

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COMMENT

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¶17. (C) Although we were able to have brief conversations with ethnic Tibetans, close monitoring by our FAO handler and other security officials was aimed at keeping such discussions to a minimum. Having an ethnic Tibetan FSN with a broad range of local contacts, however, certainly helped us expand beyond officially approved and prepped local interlocutors. At one banquet we attended in a local restaurant near Guge, an ethnic Tibetan officer in a military delegation actually broke away from his group in a neighboring function room to greet briefly a former classmate sitting at our table - our FSN. The strategic and economic potential of the area is obvious, as is the potential for ethnic tension as improvements in the transportation infrastructure of the region bring greater numbers of non-Tibetan migrants. We also came away with an overall impression of great environmental and cultural fragility. We were fortunate to see the area at a time when its remoteness ensures it still receives relatively few visitors. Rapid expansion of paved roads and airports is likely to change that situation very soon.

BOUGHNER